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TAGS: [PROP](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KFLU](#) [CH](#) [JA](#)
SUBJECT: WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY: CHINESE REPORTERS AND
BLOGGERS VOICE FRUSTRATION OVER MEDIA RESTRICTIONS

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[B](#). BEIJING 905
[C](#). BEIJING 1066

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i.,
Dan Piccuta. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Comment

[1](#). (C) PRC journalists and bloggers lamented continued government restrictions on the media and the Internet at a May 3 Charge-hosted dinner, organized jointly by Embassy POL and PAS sections, to mark World Press Freedom Day. Our contacts, mostly outspoken journalists and bloggers in their early 30s, noted the self-censorship that results from fear of overstepping the Party line. Though the Internet remains less restricted than traditional media, blogger Ai Weiwei described how his online postings regarding the high death toll among school children in the May 12 Sichuan earthquake are regularly deleted by censors. A news assistant for a Western paper described how security forces regularly intimidate Chinese employees of foreign news bureaus. Despite these limitations, all agreed the "cage" for China's media and individual speech is now bigger and gradually expanding. (Note: That we were able to hold this dinner at all shows a degree of progress. So far, none of our guests have reported any repercussions for their attendance.) Propaganda officials have not restricted reporting on the H1N1 outbreak, mainly because the disease is seen as a "foreign problem," our guests noted. The 20th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, however, remains a third-rail for the domestic media. Our guests predicted there would be no mention of Tiananmen, even indirectly, in the Chinese press, though some reporters plan to wear white that day as a sign of remembrance/protest. Our interlocutors discussed the launch of the Global Times' English-language edition and the efforts of China's foreign-language media to gain credibility with foreign audiences. Domestically, these journalists/bloggers said, propaganda officials still push nationalist themes. For example, Party authorities are encouraging extensive positive coverage of a new film depicting the 1937 rape of Nanjing by Japanese forces. End Summary and Comment.

Journalism Contacts Celebrate Press Freedom Day

[2](#). (C) To commemorate World Press Freedom Day May 3, the Charge hosted a dinner with six outspoken journalists and bloggers. The guests were:

-- Ai Weiwei (protect), an artist and blogger who participated in the design of Beijing's iconic

"Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium;

-- Wu Wei (protect), Beijing correspondent for the independent, Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post (note: Though she writes for a Hong Kong newspaper, Wu is a PRC citizen.);

-- Guo Yukuan (protect), a correspondent for Southern Metropolis Weekly (Nandu Zhoukan), a magazine published by the Guangdong Party Committee that is known for its cutting-edge reporting;

-- Li Xin (protect), deputy international desk chief for the private, Beijing-based financial magazine Caijing;

-- Du Juan (protect), a news assistant for the British newspaper Financial Times and the founder of an unregistered professional association of Chinese citizens who work for foreign news organizations; and

-- Wang Zheng (protect), a professor at the Communications University of China and popular blogger.

Media Controls

¶3. (C) Our Chinese guests described a media environment in which self-censorship by editors and reporters results from knowing intuitively where the

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boundaries lie. Guo Yukuan said that the Communist Party Propaganda Department was becoming more savvy and sophisticated in its methods of shaping public opinion. Timing and connections were important when pushing the envelope, the group told us. For example, Li Xin said that when Caijing magazine was considering publishing a story questioning the exorbitant expense of the Olympics, editors -- knowing such a story would be "off-limits" during the Games themselves -- decided to print the piece a week prior to the opening ceremony. Caijing got away with bolder reporting, Li Xin explained, because of the strong political connections of the magazine's editor-in-chief Hu Shuli.

¶4. (C) Ai Weiwei, who has been engaged in a high-profile project to compile names of children killed when their schools collapsed during the May 12, 2008 Sichuan earthquake, said that talk of expanding media freedoms in mainland China was "all (nonsense)" and that the situation was not getting any better. Other guests, however, pushed back at this, noting gradual expansion of the media's ability to discuss some topics. Ai noted that the Internet remained relatively free compared to traditional media. Nevertheless, Ai said, his blog postings were sometimes altered or deleted outright. (Note: The host of Ai's blog, sina.com, recently deleted at least 100 of his posts related to the quake. Ai managed to repost some of the deleted entries.) Ai indicated there were limits to official tolerance of his blog. For example, he had recorded numerous interviews with parents who lost children in last year's earthquake, but posting such recordings on his blog would cause officials to "go crazy."

Most Chinese Unconcerned about Press Freedom

¶5. (C) Ai Weiwei said the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s controls on free speech were motivated

simply by a desire to stay in power. "There is no ideology in China," Ai pronounced. "The Communist Party is just a mafia." With the regime lacking clear values and ideology, Ai argued, Chinese people did not see the CCP leadership as standing for anything in particular beyond the pursuit of personal wealth. Others at the table agreed and lamented a general political apathy among college-age Chinese. Wang Zheng, who teaches television journalism at the Communications University of China, said his students were interested in the field mainly as an opportunity to "become rich and famous."

Intimidation Continues

¶16. (C) Some of our guests complained that official harassment of reporters and sources remained a problem. Du Juan, the Financial Times assistant, said a new "code of conduct" (ref A) imposed on Chinese staff of foreign news bureaus represented an attempt by the regime to reassert control of overseas media via their local employees. Du said she knew several Chinese assistants at foreign news organizations who had been approached and "intimidated" by state security agents. Similarly, Ai reported that he was often monitored by public security and state security personnel during his frequent trips to the earthquake zone in Sichuan. Often, he said, parents refused to meet with him because state security officers had warned them not to cooperate with his investigation into the deaths of school children in the quake.

No Restrictions on H1N1 Reporting...

¶17. (C) In contrast to the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARs) outbreak of 2003, when authorities suppressed news related to the health emergency, mainland journalists are free to report on the H1N1 flu outbreak. Wu, Guo, and Du all noted that the key difference was that the H1N1 outbreak had originated outside China and thus was a "foreign problem." The CCP Propaganda Department, they claimed, had not issued guidance on reporting the flu outbreak, though they noted this hands-off approach could change should H1N1 grow into a significant domestic health crisis.

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...But Plenty on Tiananmen

¶18. (C) The dinner guests agreed that there would be no mention of the 20th anniversary of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen crackdown in the mainland media. Guo said that some in China would mark the event by wearing t-shirts with references to June 4. Wu Wei said she planned to wear white that day. Wu said her editors at the SCMP were "not encouraging" extensive coverage of June 4. She said that because she was a mainland Chinese and did not hold a foreign or Hong Kong passport, her editors sometimes kept her off the most sensitive human rights stories. Nevertheless, Wu said she planned to write a feature on how history was so easily forgotten and to explain why so many young people had forgotten, or did not know about, June 4.

¶19. (C) Ai Weiwei was dismissive of efforts by Chinese to commemorate June 4 with "meaningless gestures." "Flashing t-shirts" meant nothing and would not lead to any positive change in China, he

argued. Ai compared June 4 to the 1976 Tang Shan earthquake in which an estimated 300,000 died. Only recently, Ai commented, had intellectuals in China been allowed to write extensively about the disaster. "It is too early" to discuss Tiananmen in a meaningful way, Ai argued, saying that more time needed to pass. Both Wu and Guo took issue with Ai's arguments, saying that commemoration of June 4, however small, was important. Both Wu and Guo noted that even though they were both born in the late 1970s and had only vague memories of the events of 1989, they still wanted to remember June 4. Du Juan agreed, saying all journalists had a responsibility to do something to remember Tiananmen. Du said that, contrary to popular belief, young people who knew about Tiananmen did care, and it was important that the events not be forgotten.

Expanding China's Global Media Influence

110. (C) Wu Wei noted that high-level leaders, including Politburo Standing Committee Member Li Changchun and Propaganda Department Director Liu Yunshan, had recently delivered speeches about the need to expand China's global media influence (ref B). (Note: Wu wrote a widely-circulated article in the January 13 edition of the South China Morning Post revealing that the Chinese government had allocated RMB 45 billion (USD 6.6 billion) for its global media expansion project.) Wu said, however, that Chinese leaders were only able to discuss the technical aspects of building "global media," not how to professionally report for a foreign audience. Several guests commented that the newly launched English-language edition of the Global Times (Huanqiu Shibao, a paper published by the CCP's People's Daily; see ref C) was part of this effort to reach out to foreign audiences. Guo Yukuan said the English-language edition could push the envelope more than the Chinese-language Global Times because it was aimed primarily at non-Chinese. The new English-language paper, he said, was trying to gain credibility outside of China and its editors realized they had to provide some balanced reporting to be taken seriously. Still Guo noted, the English-language Global Times maintained a hard line on "key issues" like Taiwan and Tibet. (Note: While the English-language edition of the Global Times runs the occasional huffy anti-Western editorial, it has also printed bolder stories that report critically on domestic events. For example, the May 5 edition contains a report on Ai Weiwei's efforts to compile a list of student earthquake victims. The piece, which did not appear in the Chinese edition, acknowledges censorship of Ai's blog, though it does not say specifically who is behind these deletions.)

Nationalism and the Media

111. (C) Our guests were universally dismissive of the book "Unhappy China" (Zhongguo Bu Gaoxing). The book, a nationalist rant against both the United States and China's own "pro-American" elites, was "a joke," Ai Weiwei declared, saying its radical tone was merely a ploy to sell books. While the

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leadership was not necessarily promoting "Unhappy China," Wu Wei and Guo Yukuan said, propaganda officials were hyping another nationalistic work, the movie "Nanjing, Nanjing!" The film, which depicted the 1937 "rape of Nanjing" by the invading Japanese, was designed to stir up nationalism, Guo

said, and the Party was encouraging the media to report favorably on the movie and depict it as a box office hit. In reality, Guo added, the film had not done very well and had yet to recoup its production costs.

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